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ABSTRACT

While most studies on the effects violence has on children concentrate on exposure to warfare or single cases of trauma, this document focuses on the effects of chronic violent events on the well-being of Palestinian youth. Information in this paper was attained from discussions with Palestinian youth ages 5-16 in Israel. The purpose of these discussions was to gain insight into the children's perceptions of the ongoing events, during the Intifada. Conclusions are that the Intifada represents more to Palestinian youth than a conflict with Israeli soldiers. To the children of the Intifada, it is a mechanism for seeking and securing their national identity. Most of the children reported happiness that the Intifada had arrived even though they have been subjected to beatings, school closure, shooting and imprisonment during this period of time. (SR)

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Childhood : Impressions of the intifada

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Childhood: Impressions of the Intifada

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SPRING 1993

Childhood: Impressions of the Intifada

Much research has been focussed on the effects of violence on children. Most studies have either directed their attention to instances of warfare or single case of traumatic stress events (eg. witnessing a murder, rape, disaster.)

Added attention has recently been invested in areas where children are exposed to violent conflict situations on an almost daily basis. These studies are interested in determining the effects of chronic violent events on children's well-being.

Naturally, one cannot isolate the child from the environment. The child is a member of both his family and community. The events the child is exposed to are likely to be shared by family members and the community in general. These life experiences are integral to the child's very existence. A case in point is the Palestinian child.

Palestinian children have now witnessed almost 19 months of intifada. During the period of time they have seen or themselves been subjected to curfews, beatings, shootings, deportations, imprisonment and school closure. They have also either participated in or observed demonstrations, stone throwing incidents, and other acts of civil disobedience.

None of these events are new to Palestinian children. All of them have grown up under the Israeli occupation. These occurrences are all part and parcel of their daily lives. The only differences between these pre-intifada and intifada events is their intensity, frequency, and pervasiveness. For example, children had been shot by Israeli soldiers and settlers prior to the intifada. Yearly counts used to be kept, now Palestinian deaths must be tallied daily. The same holds for all the other violent, traumatic stress events listed above.

When working with the Palestinian child one must thus be aware of the child's total life experiences. It would be naive, to say the least, to simply examine the effects of the intifada on Palestinian children as if the intifada arose from a vacuum. It is possible that adaptation and coping strategies for conflict situations had already been formed prior to the intifada. In addition, Palestinians may have built community infrastructures to support and aid them in dealing with these stressful events.

Early during the intifada I had a number of discussions with Palestinian youths: the purpose of these talks was to basically gain some insight into their perceptions of the ongoing events. It became imminently clear that most were happy that the intifada had arrived. They felt that it had given shape and form to their lives. Many stated that the intifada was allowing them to declare unequivocally and proudly who they were and that they

were here to stay. For example a 13 year old from a village said, "I've been on many demonstrations before. Each time it was in memory of past events or against the opening of new Israeli settlements. Now when we go on a demonstration, we all go. And we go knowing that we are trying to achieve something for our future. That is why it is so important that we fly the Palestinian flags and let the Israelis know that we are Palestinians. Another child said, "You know, we talk about a lot of things now ... My friends all get together and they talk about politics and the intifada. I listen and this encourages me to participate more and more.

The growing awareness amongst young children is rather uncanny. They are eager to follow the news, they eagerly seek out discussion groups, and offer their own analysis of the factors which have aided them in these types of cognitive analyses.

These children are living in the midst of the conflict ... it is in their backyards and their front yards. It is in every refugee camp, village and city. It is difficult to avoid or deny the reality of what is happening. Parents cannot protect their children from experiencing a curfew, or try to keep up appearances of normalcy by sending their children to schools which are closed. Palestinian children are repeatedly exposed to the site of Israeli soldiers carrying all forms of rifles, machine guns and beatings batons.

It has become a pastime for Palestinian children to identify the various groups of Israeli soldiers as those wearing red or green or black berets, reservists, religicus border patrol and policemen. Children can even identify the bullets being used by the sounds they make.

In a recent conversation with an 11 year old from Nablus he said, "You know the reservists used to be the last to shoot. Lots of them were fat and didn't even try to chase us ... When they shot they would shoot in the air. But lately they have been getting meaner and they now .... try to shoot us in the legs .... Shamir told them to."

A five year old girl who had been under curfew for 5 days relayed the following story to me while playing in her preschool, " I've just put all the Israeli soldiers in this water well .... so they can wash their hands from the awful smelling tear gas they shot at us." When asked why she had put them in the well, she replied, "so they can wash their hands, here I will give them some soap .... and this way they can't throw any more tear gas at me." When asked if she would let them out she said, "No, they took my brother and won't give him back, they keep shooting us and I won't let them out."

In many of their play activities preschool and kindergarten aged children have focused on the activities of Israeli soldiers.

They shoot each other with their make-believe machine guns, try to talk with one another on their "walkie talkies", they throw tear gas canisters at one another. When one visits their homes they pull out their own little arsenals which are composed of plastic, rubber, dumdum, live bullets, and tear gas canisters. One child also had broken beating baton which he proudly displayed and reported, "they hit my father with this and it broke."

Another 6 year old had found a bullet outside of the Ramallah based Israeli civil administration headquarters. He wanted to keep it as a souvenir but his mother told him to put it down or the Israelis would arrest him. He said, "That's okay I'll visit Samer." When I asked the mother who Samer was she said it was his cousin. This young boy began to tell his account of how Samer had been arrested. In graphic details he described how Samer had jumped off the top of the house. he finally concluded by saying, "when they finally caught him he had lost a shoe ... the Israeli soldier laughed at him and hit him especially hard on that foot. Samer is still in jail without a shoe."

These dialogues with children make it quite clear that children are not simply "geographically" close to the conflict situation, they are an integral and inseparable feature of it. Parents cannot keep their children locked behind doors to shelter them from these events. Even if they were to do so it would be a

fruitless endeavor because soldiers raid homes indiscriminately. Many children have been awakened in the middle of the night by soldiers pounding on their doors. In most cases, an arrest of a family member occurs. In other instances soldiers simply rampage through the homes and dump olive oil, flour, and food on the floors, and destroy furnishings.

One 8 year old girl angrily stated, "they dumped all our olive oil .... I helped my mother pick the olives because my brothers couldn't." When asked why not she looked at me as if I was asking a rather dumb question and said, "well if the Israeli soldiers saw my brothers they would arrest them." I asked her what they would eat since their was no was no olive oil and she said, "Oh! we have plenty of olive oil now .... all of our neighbors gave us some .... I think we have even more now than we had before." I asked why she was angry and she said, " They shouldn't come in our house and do this, no one did it to them ... ."

A 9 year boy from a refugee camp relayed the following story concerning his home.

> In the middle of the night they came .... He was a real tall soldier and he told us we had to be out of the house now .... My mother started crying but my father told her not

to .... Then we started taking everything out .... My sisters cleared out the kitchen .... they blew it up .... (he begins to cry) ... but I forgot to get my rabbit .... I was sleepy .... my rabbit, he was big and black ...

This child's drawing of his house's demolition graphically portrays the chaos and turmoil the child experienced. He had carefully drawn the makeshift rabbit coop and then scribbled over it until it was difficult to identify. Six months later this same child refused to keep rabbits and declared, "When the Israelis leave I will make a nice place for all rabbits."

This sense of mistrust of all Israeli soldiers is common amongst almost all children interviewed. Frequently I would ask the children to imagine what the Israeli soldiers did while they were at their own homes. Young children, 8 years and younger, found this to be an amusing situation. Many had never thought that the soldiers went to homes.

A typical response given to this question is, "oh! I guess they clean out their equipment and count it .... check to see if it works, and they do a lot of target practice." When the children were told that these soldiers have families, work, eat, and sleep they were surprised. For them soldiers meant some sort of

different type of person. One who was not real or normal. To these young children the Israeli soldiers truly connoted the notion of a "fighting machine."

The older children were much more aware of the fact that Israeli had other activities in their lives besides the army. However many of them focussed considerable attention on the idea that these soldiers would go home and tell their family and friends about what that they had done to the Palestinian people. One 12 year old boy said, "well I thing he tells his friends things like he was afraid to walk alone .... or always carried his gun ready to shoot ... even at a shadow .... maybe his mother doesn't know that he shoots and beats little girls .... I don't know what else."

a 14 year old boy from the Gaza Strip said, " Some soldiers go home and try to forget what they did ... that is why the Israelis don't put too many pictures on the television .... they go crazy when they beat us and shoot us and we still confront them ... I don't think they tell their families and friends much ... even when they are patrolling the streets together they don't talk with each other ... but they remember "

A 10 year old girl said, " I think when they go home they sleep because they walk so much .... but when they get mad they hit each other .... ." Her brother replied, "The Jews only hit

Palestinians ... they don't hit Jews because they are Jewish."

Throughout these conversations with children of all ages they make a clear distinction between Palestinian and Israeli identities. In their drawings this is clearly depicted. Soldiers are on one side and Palestinians on the other. In 90% of all pictures seen, a Palestinian flag is represented at least once in the picture. When a child is asked to identify who he or she is they state Palestinian. Many of these children focus considerable detail on the appearance of soldiers. At the beginning of the intifada Israeli soldiers would be drawn larger and out of proportion relative to Palestinians. Over a period of time Israeli soldiers and Palestinians were drawn equal in size, However a soldier inevitably carries a gun, baton and wears drab colored clothing. Palestinian children often times draw road blocks, burning tires, children with rocks in their hands and in the air. In rare instances do you find pictures of people running away most portray children in confrontation with Israeli soldiers. There are numerous instances of children with bullet wounds, or in the process of being beaten, and/ or arrested.

A striking feature is the absence of facial expression on many Palestinians. There may be 20 Palestinians in a picture, one or two have frowns on their face while the rest only have eyes. Israeli soldiers are typically draw with complete facial features and expressions of anger. It is unclear yet why this is so. It

could be that the children don't have time to fill in the facial expressions of all or else the 2 or 3 faces they fill in are meant to represent the rest of the Palestinians. Another plausible hypothesis is that it expresses for children, "sumud."

This term infers steadfastness, the ability to withstand and bear hardships, a determined struggles for existence with future prospects of reaping positive outcomes. Many children have assimilated this concept into their own egos. Over 80% of 12 - 16 year old anticipated that the intifada would last at least 3 to 5 years and even longer until they achieved their goal of an independent state. When questioned as to if they could withstand the current hardships they typically reply, "Why of course .... haven't we been doing so .... thus far."

Sumud must not be interpreted as a defense mechanism of denial. One talks about the difficulties of life, one expresses one's anger and frustration but then a cognitive mechanism comes into play and directs activity towards the future. Sumud infers taking actions to achieve one's objectives.

Maybe for children sumud is perceived as an individual and community based coping mechanism. Hence in their pictures their feelings (facial expressions) are secondary to the actions taking place (confrontation) amongst people.

This phenomena has repeatedly occurred in dialogues with children who have been physically injured during the intifada. Boys, 11 - 16 years, were interviewed concerning their injures. In the majority of cases these boys would give a clear, simple account of how they were shot. Additional attention was directed to those who had aided them in receiving medical attention. Inevitably these boys would direct the conversation towards the situation in general. They would relate incidents of other community members who had been shot, how various people had come to visit and encourage them to get well so they could repartake in the intifada. Considerable energy was invested by these youths to make me understand that these injuries did not hinder them from being fully devoted to the Palestinian cause. For example, a 12 year old with an abdominal injury said, "I was wounded last month and now have a tube in my stomach .... It doesn't bother me .... my mother was very upset and my friends were afraid to tell her that I had been shot .... but now everything is okey .... my friends come every day and encourage me to stay involved .... they don't want me to be afraid ..... of course I could get shot again maybe even become a martyr .... but that is to be expected."

Another 12 year old from a refugee camp said, "I saw the soldier aiming .... I had a Palestinian flag in my left hand and a stone in the right .... He shot at my left hand .... it was a dumdum because pieces of it exploded into 3 fingers .... there are still

a few pieces left in these fingers because the doctor said they might damage a nerve if he removed them. I was out throwing stones the next day .... I am not afraid of Israeli soldiers .... they are afraid of us, I only carry a rock they carry a rifle .... we don't need their guns .... ."

Trends within these dialogues all focus on "WE" not "ME". It is this sense of community sharing and involvement which has truly reached the children. They are socially and culturally tied to the events happening around them. They are united.

When a 13 year old was asked how it felt to be the highlight of so much attention he replied, ".... you think that it is just us young children who are involved .... you are wrong .... the older people write the sayings on this on the wall, they organize events, they help us plan, they demonstrate with us, they talk with us, and help us plan, they understand the situation, our mothers confront the soldiers, they keep us well nourished, they give us blood, they protect us, ... our younger brothers and sisters tell us when and where the Israelis are coming from .... can't you see that everyone has a role and each one is important .... ."

These children are an integral part of the Palestinian society. They have been raised by their families and the community as the basis for the future of Palestine. They are dynamic, alive,

well-functioning, and developing into active and empowered adults.

This does not imply that violence is acceptable. It simply means that in the on going struggle Palestinian children are seeking their national identities. They are playing an active and effective role in sharing their future. This would not have been possible if the family was incapable of functioning as an effective support system.

Children have also been able to rely upon the society and community in general for support. Almost all its member and undergoing the same problems. This has created a sense of unity and comradeship amongst all Palestinians. This form of moral and social support provides an effective support system for all.

Relatives and neighbors meet each other almost daily. They have been associated with one another long before the intifada. But the intifada has provided them with the fuel and motivation to reach their hands out to one another. People also realize that misfortunes and rewards are experienced by all and are part of their national heritage. However, these forms of social commitments are one of the mainstays of the intifada and have contributed to its longevity.

I would like to note that this paper has focused primary

attention on the general responses of a majority of children. This does not deny the existence of many problems which are experiences by children like bed wetting, nightmares, withdrawal, eating disorders, and aggressive behaviors. However these problems appeared much more frequently at the start of the intifada. Evidently as the coping strategies of parents and family members increased, problems decreased amongst children.

In addition, many children have experienced the loss of parents and siblings who have been killed by the Israeli forces and settlers. Nationally it is expected that these events will have long lasting effects on children. Some of these effects may ameliorated by the presence of extended families and the possibility of close relatives aiding the child's sound mental development. Furthermore, the community has rallied around the families of martyrs and offered moral support to all family members.

In summary, when one interacts with Palestinian children one is faced with the reality of the situation. Children have lost their childhood. They are concerned with the physical and mental well-beings of their family, community and self. children cannot shrug these concerns aside because they live in the midst of the conflict. However, the intifada represents much more than a conflict with Israeli soldiers. To children the intifada is a mechanism for seeking and securing their identity. It is also a

means of empowering oneself. To sacrifice for the good of all, to share in achieving a goal that is cherished by all. In most instances children are proud of their role in this movement.